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## ON THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>

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I confess that I have come to this meeting to voice a revolt against a condition that seems to be general and fundamental in the field of English. Like Satan, I come from going to and fro in the earth and from walking up and down in it. For two years I have been almost daily in the better schools, and by an administrative exigency my observations have centered to a considerable degree upon the teaching of literature. The conclusion forces itself upon me that there is something paralyzingly at fault in our methods of introducing children to the spirit of English letters. The net result appears to be that instead of connecting them with a dynamo we administer an anaesthetic, or at best give them a coat of shellac.

Recognizing, for sane perspective, the importance of the oral emphasis, I must still consider that the dynamic teaching of literature is the very heart of the English teaching process. Our prime business always has been and must continue to be connecting the powers that are in children with the powers that are in books. It has therefore seemed useful to attack our discussion from the angle of an administrative philosophy of the teaching of literature. What I shall say is offered very tentatively. It is immature and lacks the detail which should give it body and weight. I can only proceed, in a sort of "holy terror," hoping that my awkward treatment may not prejudice what seems to me a tremendously important measure of reconstruction.

On the basis of a typical English teacher's training of the better sort, of wide observation of class work in literature and of a scrutiny of many texts, I am convinced that two criteria control almost entirely our selection and treatment of literature; the first is

<sup>1</sup>Address to the Congress on Reconstruction in Education, English Section, Albany, New York, while Mr. Bair was still the New York State Specialist in English.

tradition, and the second, literary form or type. We need not abandon these; we must, if we are to have life, clearly subordinate both.

In dealing with the criterion of tradition, let me say promptly that I do not rise as the champion of a mere Philistine immediacy. I would have my children worship a God "in whose eyes a thousand years are but as yesterday when it is past." My protest is not against the use of the past, but against dead formulas, past, present, or to come. I object to the way we use the past, for "He is not the God of the dead but of the living." We must not rule against a bit of literature because it is old; nor because it is new; we must rule in favor of literature which has, in terms of our students, the sanction of reality. And, in a distressingly large number of cases, we are not doing this.

The crux of the matter seems to me to be that both these criteria are static, and as regards the children in our schools, external and artificial. They admit and encourage the use of a narrow literary canon which is obstructive, archaic, and intrenched against change. As an indication of the soundness of this view I point you to the paralysis of reading among folk who emerge from our Hart, Schaffner and Marx literary machine. Creatively and critically, the spawn of our factory uniformity are either joyous vulgarians who "throw up their stinking night-caps" and thank God they have done with these literary fossil-beds, or sensitive paralytics, if you will tolerate the bull, wrecks of what might have been.

The present status of our teaching of literature below the colleges, then, may be summarized in the following:

#### BOOK OF LITERARY GENESIS

In the beginning, the college professors created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the college professors said, "Let there be light." And they established the literary canon. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

Then the college professors took dry dust of the earth and breathed upon it and made the secondary school teacher of literature in their own image. And the secondary school teacher saw that darkness was still upon the face

of the deep, and she also said, "Let there be light." And immediately there were introduction, rising action, climax, and the types of literature.

And the Spirit of Letters arose and shook the dust of the academes from his feet, and went forth into a real world where by sincere criticism and honest creation he earned his bread by the sweat of his brow, and waxed great accordingly.

The parody, like most parodies, is only partly true. It ignores the fact of intent; the history of the matter shows that the collegians had in mind a composition examination, and, wishing the candidates for college entrance to have an even start, dictated a number of books as a basis for examination. It ignores, moreover, the further fact that a limited and faulty list, thus secured for reading, has been vastly better than none. But the fact remains that we have a distorted and perverted teaching of literature in our public schools which cries to high heaven for a change.

Where shall we look, then, for an authentic teaching of literature? We must seize upon a controlling principle which is not merely traditional and external and formal, but which is eternally alive, advancing with changing conditions, and which demands the mobilization of the forces that are in books, not in fixed battalions and fossilized sequences but in terms of the bona fide needs of the readers, personal and social.

I would urge that the principle lies in a conception of literature as an approach to things greater than itself—let us say personalities, social relations, the effect of phases of nature upon men, ideas. Literature is a by-product just as truly as character is a by-product, or happiness. It becomes vibrant, human, ministering, when it is regarded as skilled and luminous—at least, sincere—revelation of matters of temporary or eternal import to the reader. A reading which judges literature in terms of its clearness, sincerity, and adequacy to its end becomes critical reading and the father of creative writing. Authentic teaching of literature is then the teaching of the best expression of significant experience.

It is in this cutting ourselves free from dead criteria and trusting to the dynamic conception of letters as media to grander things that we come into the full sweep of the possibilities and powers of our subject. Clearly, the form of literature is important but

subordinate and relatively accidental. Your baby dies, or you pass through the Battle of the Argonne, or some other experience of human significance. If you are a Carlyle, you explode volcanically with a rain of boiling lava and capitals; if you are a Keats you open the brazen sky of our Philistinism until we glimpse heaven above heaven in evanescent, shifting cloud forms; if you are a Shakespeare you create manikins to pull at our heartstrings and make us act the story. The form is relatively of little account, but the *soul* of the matter abides with us. So, too, in coming at the heart of things, tradition must give way or prove itself by the superior sanction of reality.

This, then, or something like it, is the conception of literature which, in my judgment, points the way in large terms to a fundamental reconstruction in English. I have tried, by way of illustration, to embody the idea in the form of a number of skeletonized courses in literature, in which literary structure and tradition are subordinated, and the literature is selected by controlling ideas, or as revelations of personality or of vital social relations. It is interesting that a committee of New York state teachers of English are engaged at present in formulating some courses along these lines as possible alternatives to the present third- and fourth-year lists in the high school.

The first is a course in great American personalities, including the man of action, the man of letters, the statesman, the thinker, and the humorist. It is intended that students shall select one characteristic personality for intensive study under each head, and that the class shall elect from a list of minor studies and by committee reports familiarize themselves with other interesting folk in each class.

Another suggestive course is intended for the third year, to reveal the spirit of New England, the Middle States, the South, the West, the Middle West, by the literature characteristic of each. Here is a rich, indigenous field. A third course will present an exploration of contemporary literature of all nations as far as it is worth while and available. To learn life through letters, a delightful experiment would be to read the literature of the farm, of the industrial world, of the metropolis, of the water, woods, and hills.

It must be a tenet of the philosophy of genuine reconstruction, if I apprehend the situation rightly, that there shall be no universal and static prescription, limited to a narrow canon. Last year I had occasion to study the merits of farm tractors. I came to the conclusion that there is no "best tractor"; there is only a "best tractor" for *my farm*. So, for all students, there is no such thing as the best book; there is the best book for the particular student. Only by recognizing this obvious principle *practically* shall we break away from the body of this death.

This leads me to speak briefly about something which Professor Abbott will, I hope, develop in detail. Between the sixth and tenth grades, I believe we should replace our study of a few literary classics with library courses, in which the students spend most of their time discovering and appropriating what belongs to them, and in exchanging with their fellows in clearing-houses of discussion under the teacher's direction. There is a book, or many of them, for every child—perhaps bits of books, hidden in golden paragraphs among dull, stodgy pages, but I am sure that we older meddlers are not omniscient enough to bring the child and the book which feeds his spirit together. There is a magnet in him—a spiritual valence between the slumbering author and the little pioneer—and *if we will only get out of the way* it will kindle them both to fire. Given such courses in the hands of reasonably acute teachers for three years and our children will read and write better and will be rich in "kings' treasures."

I have left for a conclusion the most telling arraignment, perhaps, because so obvious, of our present selection and methods of teaching literature, and one of the most promising implications of the new approach—the effect upon the teacher.

Evidently the teacher must be growing, even as she expects her children to grow, but on a wider radius. No one is quicker in intuition than a child to know that he is yoked with a corpse. Recall the old Missouri Sunday-school teacher's prayer: "Oh Lord, grant us a more active corpse of teachers." It is, of course, not due to our handling of literature alone, but it is in considerable degree due to it, that so pitifully many teachers have lost the spirit of the explorer and have become mummies and automata,

Fletcherizing, for the twentieth time, literary husks. Behind the book, there must be *books*, and the teacher must be a luminous embodiment of that fact. Was it not Mr. Titbottom, in "Prue and I" who had the magic spectacles, so that, through them, he saw things as they really are? I remember through a mist of years, but it seems that he looked at his old schoolmasters: "And one of them became a switch, a string, a birch rod. And I looked at another, and he became a well of cool water, and looking in, I saw the stars." But we must assure our teachers springs of constant renewal if they would be living water.

In the subordination of the criteria of tradition and literary structure, and in the conception of literature as a fine by-product of larger ends, the revealer of ideas, personality, or social relations, we have a wellspring of renewal for the teacher of literature. She must have more of the spirit of Kipling's "Explorer," or of Tennyson's "Ulysses"

Much have I seen and known; cities of men  
And manners, climates, councils, governments,  
Myself not least, but honored of them all;  
And drunk delight of battle with my peers  
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.  
I am a part of all that I have met  
Yet all experience is an arch, wherethrough  
Gleams that untraveled world, whose margin fades  
Forever, and forever, as I move.

Here, as I see it, is at least in part the essence of the vitalization of English teaching. If some such attack succeed, I hope and believe that we are at the close of an era of the teaching of literature in America and at the beginning of a more glorious one. And unless some more vital criteria than those now controlling our teaching issue from the effort of reconstruction, the Spirit of Letters, for millions of our school boys and girls, must continue to mantle its face and shake the dust of the academic museums from its feet.